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DOCUMENTS

LETTERS OF ANTHONY BENEZET

Benezet published his letters at his own expense and distributed them with the accompanying circular letter below.

“Copy of the substance of a letter written to several persons of note, both in Europe and America, on sending them some of the negroe pamphlets, viz. account of Africa, &c. particularly to the ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, dated about the year 1758, and since.

“With the best respects I am capable of, and from, I trust, no other motive but that of love to mankind; and from a persuasion of thy sincere desires for the suppression of evil and the promotion of that righteousness which alone exalteth a nation, I make bold affectionately to salute thee, and to request a little of thy attention to a subject which has long been a matter of deep concern to many, vast many, well disposed people of all denominations in these parts, viz. that of the negroe trade, the purchase and bringing the poor negroes from their native land, and subjecting them to a state of perpetual bondage, the most cruel and oppressive, in which the English nation is so deeply engaged, and which with additional sorrow we observe to be greatly increasing in their northern colonies, and likely still more to increase by the acquisition the English have lately made of the factories on the river Senegal. I herewith send thee some small treatises lately published here on that subject, wherein are truly set forth the great inhumanity and wickedness which this trade gives life to, whereby hundreds of thousands of our fellow creatures, equally with us the objects of Christ's redeeming grace, and as free as we are by nature, are kept under the worst oppression, and many of them yearly brought to a miserable and untimely end.

“I make bold earnestly to entreat, that thou wouldst be pleased seriously to read them, when I doubt not thou wilt perceive it to be a matter which calls for the most deep consideration of all who are concerned for the civil, as well as religious welfare of their country, and who are desirous to avert those judgments, which evils of such a dye must necessarily sooner or later bring upon every people

who are defiled therewith, and will, I trust, plead my excuse for the freedom I take in thus addressing myself to thee. How an evil of so deep a dye, has so long, not only passed unnoticed, but has even had the countenance of the government, and been supported by law, is surprising; it must be because many worthy men in power, both of the laity and clergy, have been unacquainted with the horrible wickedness with which the trade is carried on, the corrupt motives which give life to it, and the groans, the numberless dying groans, which daily ascend to God, the common father of mankind, from the broken hearts of those our deeply oppressed fellow creatures.”¹

“PHILADELPHIA, TENTH MONTH, 30th, 1772.

“I herewith send thee a small tract (which I desire thou mayest keep) lately sent me by Granville Sharp; it is an appendix to his former treatise, and was published on account of the late negro trial. He has wrote me a long intelligent letter, with relation to the situation of things in London on that head, which I shall be well pleased to have an opportunity to communicate to thee. It seems lord Mansfield, notwithstanding truth forced him to give such a judgment, was rather disposed to favour the cause of the master than that of the slave. He advised the master to apply to the parliament then sitting, which was done accordingly, but without success. He fears such an application will be renewed at the next session, and is preparing through his friends in parliament and the bishops, to endeavour to prevent its taking place, and calls for our help from this side the water. In this case as he desires a speedy answer, I stand in need of the advice of my friends what answer to make him. I have already let one opportunity pass; there will be soon another to Liverpool. I have also to communicate an interesting letter from Benjamin Franklin on the same subject.”

“PHILADELPHIA, ELEVENTH MONTH, 30th, 1772.

“*Dear Samuel,*

“I received both thy letters, inclosing the petition, and have been concerned that I have not sooner acquainted thee with what had been resulted thereon; but the care of a large school, engagement upon engagement, I think four or five evenings last week, on

¹ All of these letters are taken from Roberts Vaux's "Memoirs of the Life of Anthony Benezet," pp. 25-62.

committees, &c., and the books which I received from England, which I intended to send thee not being all returned, occasioned the delay. The vessel from Virginia being near its departure when the petitions came to hand, had but just time to confer with James Pemberton, on the expediency of forwarding them, when we concluded best to take more time and wait for a future opportunity which he thought would offer. I herewith send thee such of the pieces relating to slavery, &c. of the negroes, which I have been able to get back; people are shamefully careless in not returning borrowed books. That wanting, wrote by a West Indian, I will send hereafter. I have received since I saw thee, a letter from the chief justice of South Carolina, which will I believe afford thee much satisfaction."

"PHILADELPHIA, TWELFTH MONTH, 14th, 1773.

"*Beloved Friend,*

"The passage we were seeking for is Psalms 68, 31, 'Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God,' under which name all that part of Africa inhabited by negroes may be comprehended, and that these are the people here intended is clear from Jer. 13, 23, 'can the Ethiopian change his skin?'

"Since my return I have received letters from Thomas Nicholson in North Carolina, Edward Stabler in Virginia, and James Berry in Maryland, all leading members in their several yearly meetings (these I shall be glad to communicate to thee) expressive of their concern for forwarding the great and good work we are engaged in. Edward Stabler, clerk of the yearly meeting of Virginia, expresses, that though they have not yet received the encouragement they desire to their petition in England, yet it has not abated the zeal of some of their leading men against the traffic."

"PHILADELPHIA, FOURTH MONTH, 28th, 1773.

"*Doctor John Fothergill,*

"Thy kind letter of the twenty-eighth of Eight Month last, I received in due time, and gratefully acknowledge thy kind sympathy therein expressed. I am likeminded with thee, with respect to the danger and difficulty which would attend a sudden manumission of those negroes now in the southern colonies, as well as to themselves, as to the whites; wherefore except in particular cases the obtaining their freedom, and indeed the freedom of many even

amongst us, is by no means the present object of my concern. But the best endeavors in our power to draw the notice of the governments, upon the grievous iniquity and great danger attendant on a further prosecution of the slave trade, is what every truly sympathising mind cannot but earnestly desire, and under divine direction promote to the utmost of their power. If this could be obtained, I trust the sufferings of those already amongst us, by the interposition of the government, and even from selfish ends in their masters, would be mitigated, and in time Providence would gradually work for the release of those, whose age and situation would fit them for freedom. The settlements now in prospect to be made in that large extent of country, from the west side of the Alleghany mountains to the Mississippi, on a breadth of four or five hundred miles, would afford a suitable and beneficial means of settlement for many of them among the white people, which would in all probability be as profitable to the negroes as to the new settlers. But I do not desire to take up thy time especially with matters of so remote a nature, it being indeed with reluctance I take up any of it, which I would have avoided, was there any person to whom I could have addressed myself with the same expectation, that what I have in view would be thereby answered. An address has been presented to our assembly, desiring it would use its utmost endeavours with the king and parliament, that an end may be put to the slave trade, by laying a duty of twenty pounds on all slaves imported. It was thought necessary that some friends with you should be acquainted with the further steps that had been, or were likely to be taken, so as to enable you to speak in support of the law, if necessary: to which end I herewith send thee a copy of the address, also a copy of what I now write to our agent, Benjamin Franklin, on that head, in order to make him acquainted with what passes here on this momentous concern.

"I have also enclosed a number of copies of a pamphlet wrote at the time we presented the petition, in order to lay the weight of the matter briefly before the members of the assembly, and other active members of government in this and the neighbouring provinces. It was written by Benjamin Rush, a young physician of the Presbyterian communion, a person who I understand thou was acquainted with, when pursuing his studies three or four years past with you. I almost send a small collection of religious tracts, chiefly compiled for the use of inquiring people in our back countries, where such books are much wanted. I endeavoured so to col-

lect them as to be plain, instructive and edifying, without touching upon that which might be of fruitless debate.

“ANTHONY BENEZET.”

“PHILADELPHIA, FOURTH MONTH, 1773.

“*Granville Sharp,*

“I wrote thee at large, by a vessel for Ireland, about six weeks past, and also three weeks ago by the packet from New York, respecting the steps taken, and likely to be pursued in the several more northern provinces, in relation to the slave trade. I am glad to understand from my friend Benjamin Franklin, that you have commenced an acquaintance, and that he expects in future, to concert with thee in the affair of slavery. I herewith send thee some pamphlets, and in a confidence of thy goodness of heart, which by looking to the intention, will construe the freedom I have taken in the best light,

“I remain with love,

“ANTHONY BENEZET.”

“HANOVER, January 18, 1773.

“*Dear Sir:*

“I take this opportunity to acknowledge the receipt of Anthony Benezet’s book against the slave trade: I thank you for it. It is not a little surprising, that the professors of christianity, whose chief excellence consists in softening the human heart, in cherishing and improving its finer feelings, should encourage a practice so totally repugnant to the first impressions of right and wrong. What adds to the wonder is, that this abominable practice has been introduced in the most enlightened ages. Times, that seem to have pretensions to boast of high improvements in the arts and sciences, and refined morality, have brought into general use, and guarded by many laws, a species of violence and tyranny, which our more rude and barbarous, but more honest ancestors detested. Is it not amazing, that at a time, when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision, in a country, above all others, fond of liberty; that in such an age, and in such a country, we find men professing a religion the most humane, mild, gentle and generous, adopting a principle as repugnant to humanity, as it is inconsistent with the bible, and destructive to liberty? How few in practice from conscientious motive!

“Would any one believe that I am master of slaves, of my own

purchase! I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living here without them. I will not, I cannot justify it. However capable my conduct, I will so far pay my devoir to virtue, as to own the excellence and rectitude of her precepts, and lament my want of conformity to them.

"I believe a time will come when an opportunity will be offered to abolish this lamentable evil. Every thing we can do, is to improve it, if it happens in our day; if not, let us transmit to our descendants, together with our slaves, a pity for their unhappy lot, and an abhorrence for slavery. If we cannot reduce this wished for reformation to practice, let us treat the unhappy victims with lenity. It is the furthest advance we can make towards justice. It is a debt we owe to the purity of our religion, to show that it is at variance with that law, which warrants slavery.

"I know not where to stop. I could say many things on the subject; a serious view of which, gives a gloomy perspective in future times!" ²

"PHILADELPHIA, TENTH MONTH, 23d, 1774.

"*Dear ———.*

"I was pleased to hear from thee. I have not been unmindful of endeavoring to lay before all the delegates I have conversed with, the dreadful situation of the people in the most southern provinces, and the absolute necessity they are under of ceasing, at least from any farther import of negroes. With Patrick Henry I went further, he gave some attention when I mentioned from whence I apprehended we must look for deliverance, even from God alone, but pursuing such methods as would be most agreeable to the nature of the Beneficent Father of the family of mankind, whose love and regard to his children, even such who were influenced by wrong dispositions, remained unchangeable. That we could not conciliate the Divine regard, but by acting agreeably to the Divine attribute, which was love, and was to overcome by suffering.

"That whatever wound might be given or received, between us and the mother country, if ever that which was right prevailed, we should mourn over. That as christianity knew of no enemies, we could not expect deliverance by the violent method proposed, without departing from the true foundation. To this with seriousness he replied, that it was strange to him, to find some of the Quakers manifesting so different a disposition from that I had de-

² Written by Patrick Henry.

scribed. I reminded him that many of them had no other claim to our principles, but as they were children or grandchildren of those who professed those principles. I suppose his remark principally arose from the violent spirit which some under our profession are apt to show, more particularly in the congress, amongst whom I understand one of the deputies from your city, and one from ours, appear as principals for promoting such measures. I feel but little apprehension at the prospect of things, which to many is so alarming. People are afraid of being disturbed in their enjoyments, in their ease, their confidence in the world, and the things of it. But I fear nothing more than giving way to a spirit whose hope and expectation is from the unchristian, yea unnatural, and cruel measures proposed by many, too many, who seemed to have worked themselves to such a pitch, that it looks as if they were athirst for blood! Its from God alone, by true faith in his promises, deliverance must arise; and if from the prevalence of other measures affliction and distress should be our lot, it will be our own fault if it does not work for our good. Oh! if a sufficient concern prevailed to experience grace to gain the victory, to know all worldly inclinations and desires to be brought under the regulation of the humbling power of the gospel, many would feel so much of self in themselves, inducing to hope and seek for comfort from the world, from our ease and plenty, which is yet as a bar to obtaining an establishment in the pure, the humble, self denying path of truth. If we properly felt our wants, the gulf between us and true peace, if the combat between nature and grace were duly maintained, the dread of outward evils would have little weight with us, however we fall by outward commotion, even if the earth should be dissolved, if in proper dispositions we cannot fall lower than in God's arms.

“ANTHONY BENEZET.

“P. S. I should have been glad to have seen thyself and dear companion before you left us, but make it a rule to take no exception where no slight is intended; indeed where it is, to bear it, and take the first opportunity to return kindness for the contrary, as most noble, and most conducive to peace.”

“PHILADELPHIA, THIRD MONTH, 30th, 1774.

“I was sorrowfully disappointed in not seeing thee in town I had just received a long letter from Granville Sharp, which I should have been glad of an opportunity of showing thee, and

taking thy advice upon a suitable answer, more particularly upon a matter he appears to have much at heart, viz. our procuring as many petitions as possible from persons of some weight in the several provinces, to the same purport as ours to the assembly, immediately to the king alone. As I shall not send my letter before William Dillwyn goes, which may be some time first, perhaps I may still have an opportunity of consulting thee on this matter. Inclosed I send the copy of an argument, &c. I found in Granville Sharp's letter which strikes me boldly and deeply. I hope the idea will have a tendency to raise generous sentiments in some of thy brethren of the law, whose hearts are not yet quite scared with the love of the world, to appear in the noble cause of real liberty. I showed it to Dr. Rush, and inquiring whether we should publish it in the prints, he replied, 'they would knock us on the head if we did.' I believe it will in future be profitably made use of. Remember me affectionately to James Kinsey, I should be glad to know his sentiments on the law reasoning of the argument. What a great thing it is to stand up for liberty, true liberty, from a mind truly delivered from all selfishness, in an unfeigned love to God and mankind. O the selfishness of the human heart, how much of it is apt still to cleave to us, even when our designs are upright."

"Dear Samuel,

"I herewith send thee a dozen pamphlets. I shall be glad that these and more of the same may be handed to the members of your assembly, and such others in your province, with whom they may be likely to promote a representation being made to the king and parliament against the slave trade."

"Seventh day, 4 o'clock.

"Dear Friend,

"I should have been very glad to have got thee to peruse the notes (on slavery) I intend to make, as they will be large, and I wish if possible to put them into the hands of the members of every assembly on the continent, except South Carolina and Georgia, but do not desire thou shouldst be put out of the way on that occasion. I suppose it will be eight or ten, or more days before in the press. It might preserve me from inadvertently publishing something which might rather weaken the cause we have both at heart. However, in this, and all other things, I desire to stand clear in the purity of my design, and leave the event, but watch against my national activity."

FROM GOVERNOR LIVINGSTONE, OF NEW JERSEY

"The piece on slave keeping is excellent, but the arguments against the lawfulness of war, have been answered a thousand times. May the father of lights lead us into all truths, and over all the commotions of this world, to his own glory, and the introduction of that kingdom of peace and righteousness, which will endure forever. Believe me to be your sincere friend."

FROM AMBROSE SERLE, SECRETARY TO LORD HOWE

"PHILADELPHIA, JUNE 2d, 1778.

"I ought not to omit, my valued friend, the returning you my kindest thanks for your obliging present of books, which I shall peruse with intention, and for your sake keep them by me. It would be happy for the world at large, and for individuals, if the principles they maintain were rightly understood and cordially received; we should in that case have had no occasion to deplore the present miseries and troubles, which (as the certain effect of sin) naturally result from the ambition, dishonesty and other unmortified passions of mankind. The world on the contrary would be something like a paradise regained; and universal benevolence and philanthropy, reside as they ought in the human heart. But though from long experience we may and must despair of the general diffusion of christian sentiments and practice, we have this comfortable trust, in our own particular persons, that we have a peace which the world can neither give nor take away; and though the kingdoms of this world tumble into confusion, and are lost in the corrupted strivings of men, we have a kingdom prepared of God, incorruptible and that cannot fade away. There, though I see your face no more upon earth, I have hope of meeting with you again; both of us divested of all that can clog or injure our spirits, and both participating that fulness of joy which flows from God's right hand for evermore. To his tender protection I commend you, and remain with sincere esteem your affectionate friend."

FROM JOHN WESLEY

"Mr. Oglethorp you know went so far as to begin settling a colony without negroes, but at length the voice of those villains prevailed who sell their country and their God for gold, who laugh at human nature and compassion, and defy all religion but that of getting money. It is certainly our duty to do all in our power to

check this growing evil, and something may be done by spreading those tracts which place it in a true light. But I fear it will not be stopped till all the kingdoms of this earth become the kingdoms of our God."

FROM NATHANIEL GILBERT, OF ANTIGUA

"October 29, 1768.

"I desire to embrace as my brethern all who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity. I cannot but think that all true christians agree in fundamentals. Your tracts concerning slavery are very just, and it is a matter I have often thought of, even before I became acquainted with the truth: your arguments are forcible against purchasing slaves, or being any way concerned in that trade."

"PHILADELPHIA, SEVENTH MONTH, 16th, 1781.

"*My Friend Abbé Raynal,*

"From the idea which I conceived of the justice, and generosity of thy sentiments, I took the liberty of writing to thee about seven or eight months past under cover of my friend Benjamin Franklin, and likewise by J—— B——, who we are afraid was lost on his passage. Having received no answer by several vessels, nor knowing whether my letters reached thee, or whether thine miscarried, and a good opportunity offering by my friend Dr. Griffitts, I now seize it to send thee two copies of a small extract of origin and principles of my brethern the Quakers, whom I observe in such of thy writings as have come to our hands, thou didst not think unworthy of thy attention. I have nothing to add to what I have already wrote thee, but I shall repeat my wish of saluting thee affectionately on the principles of reason and humanity, which constitutes that grand circle of love and charity, unconfined by our parentage or country, but which affectionately embraces the whole creation, earnestly desiring to the utmost of my abilities to promote the happiness of all men, even of my enemies themselves, could I have any. I beseech God to give thee strength that thou mayest continue to hold up to mankind, thy brethren, principles tending to replenish their hearts with goodness, friendship and charity towards each other, that thus thou mayest, to the utmost of thy power, render men reasonable, useful, and consequently happy; and more especially that thou mayest combat that false principle of honour, or rather of intolerable pride and folly, which so strongly prevails in our nation, where the most indolent, and the

least useful, fancy themselves, and are reputed the most noble. Let us endeavour to make them sensible that men are noble, but in exact proportion with their being rational. The happiness which is to be found in virtue alone, is sought for by men through the titles acquired by their fathers for their activity in those wars which have desolated the world, or in the wealth accumulated by their ancestors; both means generally unjust and oppressive, and consequently rather sources of shame and humiliation. For as the Chinese philosopher well observes, ‘there is scarcely one rich man out of an hundred, who was not himself an oppressor, or the son of an oppressor.’

“Let us display to princes and rulers of nations, the example of Numa Pompilius, who, by a conduct opposite to that of Romulus, his predecessor, and most of his successors, rendered the Romans, during his long reign, so respectable and happy. Above all, my dear friend, let us represent to our compatriots the abominable iniquity of the Guinea trade. Let us put to the blush the pretended disciples of the benign Saviour of the World, for the encouragement given to the unhappy Africans in invading the liberty of their own brethren. Let us rise, and rise with energy against the corruption introduced into the principles and manners of the masters and owners of slaves, by a conduct so contrary to humanity, reason, and religion. Let us be still more vehement in representing its baneful influence on the principles and manners of their wretched offspring, necessarily educated in idleness, pride, and all the vices to which human nature is liable.

“How desirable is it that Lewis the Sixteenth, whose virtues, and good disposition have been so nobly praised, would set an example to the other potentates of Europe, by forbidding his subjects to be concerned in a traffic so evil in itself, and so corrupting in its consequences; and that he would also issue out ordinances in favour of the negroes, who are now slaves in his dominions. Alas! should christianity, that law of love and charity, work its proper effect on the hearts of its pretended disciples, we should see numbers of christians traverse Africa, and both the Indies, not to pollute themselves with slavery and slaughter, nor to accumulate wealth, the supreme wish of the present nominal christians, but that divine love would impel them to visit remote regions in order to make the inhabitants acquainted with the corruption of the human heart, and invite them to seek for the influence of that grace proposed by the gospel, by which they may obtain salvation. I am under the neces-

sity of concluding hastily, requesting thou wouldst excuse faults, which time does not allow me to correct, and to write to me by various opportunities, the vessels bound to those parts often missing their destination.

“I am affectionately thy friend,

“ANTHONY BENEZET.”

To this energetic and impassioned epistle, the abbé made the following answer.

“BRUXELLES, DECEMBER 26, 1781.

“All your letters have miscarried; happily I received that of the sixteenth of July, 1781, with the pamphlets filled with light and sensibility, which accompany it. Never was any present more agreeable to me. My satisfaction was equal to the respect I have always had for the society of Quakers. May it please Heaven to cause all nations to adopt their principles; men would then be happy, and the globe not stained with blood. Let us join in our supplications to the supreme Being, that he may unite us in the bonds of a tender and unalterable charity.

“I am, &c.

“RAYNAL.”

TO CHARLOTTE, *Queen of Great Britain.*

“Impressed with a sense of religious duty, and encouraged by the opinion generally entertained of thy benevolent disposition to succour the distressed, I take the liberty, very respectfully, to offer to thy perusal some tracts which I believe faithfully describe the suffering condition of many hundred thousands of our fellow creatures of the African race, great numbers of whom, rent from every tender connexion in life, are annually taken from their native land, to endure, in the American islands and plantations, a most rigorous and cruel slavery, whereby many, very many of them, are brought to a melancholy and untimely end. When it is considered, that the inhabitants of Britain, who are themselves so eminently blessed in the enjoyment of religious and civil liberty, have long been, and yet are, very deeply concerned in this flagrant violation of the common rights of mankind, and that even its national authority is exerted in support of the African slave trade, there is much reason to apprehend that this has been, and as long as the evil exists, will continue to be, an occasion of drawing down the Divine displeasure on the nation and its dependencies. May these considerations in-

duce thee to interpose thy kind endeavours on behalf of this greatly oppressed people, whose abject situation gives them an additional claim to the pity and assistance of the generous mind, inasmuch as they are altogether deprived of the means of soliciting effectual relief for themselves. That so thou may not only be a blessed instrument in the hand of Him '*by whom kings reign, and princes decree justice,*' to avert the awful judgments by which the empire has already been so remarkably shaken, but that the blessings of thousands ready to perish may come upon thee, at a time when the superior advantages attendant on thy situation in this world, will no longer be of any avail to thy consolation and support. To the tracts on the subject to which I have thus ventured to crave thy particular attention, I have added some others, which at different times, I have believed it my duty to publish, and which I trust will afford thee some satisfaction; their design being for the furtherance of that universal peace, and good will amongst men, which the gospel was intended to introduce. I hope thou will kindly excuse the freedom used on this occasion, by an ancient man, whose mind for more than forty years past, has been much separated from the common course of the world, and long painfully exercised in the consideration of the miseries under which so large a part of mankind equally with us the objects of redeeming love, are suffering the most unjust and grievous oppression, and who sincerely desires the temporal, and eternal felicity of the queen and her royal consort.

“ANTHONY BENEZET.

“PHILADELPHIA, EIGHTH MONTH, 25th, 1783.”